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Discourse and Tractable Morality

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Gjalt de Graaf

Abstract

When managerial decisions are examined, somehow the business context must be included in the analysis. In this chapter, causalities that transcend individuals are promoted as unit of analysis in empirical moral research, namely, discourse. Studying managerial decisions in their discursive context is an interesting way to study the moral side of these decisions. After discussing discourse theory, the conclusion is that discourse theory can help business ethics in many different ways. It is shown what a discourse description or analysis within business ethics could look like. Special attention is paid to stories and metaphors, and to the power effects of international anticorruption discourses.

Introduction

Watson (2003, p. 168) claims that “although increasing academic attention is being paid to business ethics, the ways in which ethical consideration come into activities and decisions of organizational managers have been examined in a very limited way.” This chapter¹ contributes by suggesting an interesting way to study moral managerial decisions is studying these decisions in their discursive context. In the chapter “► **Discourse and Normative Ethics**,” the focus is on the normative side of ethics, here on descriptive ethics. Here I study why and how discourse analysis can aid descriptive business ethics.

[Au1]

In this chapter, first I claim that the internal dynamics within organizations render methodological individualism in business ethics hard to defend. Therefore,

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describing the moral side of a company by describing the moral part of managerial decision-making lends just a fragment of the whole picture. Somehow, the business *context* wherein managerial decisions are made also contains important moral information. Causalities that transcend individuals are proposed as a unit of analysis in empirical moral research, namely, discourse. I suggest that an interesting method for describing (moral) decisions of managers is looking at the way managers talk about their reality. After describing what is meant by discourse in this chapter, I suggest how discourse analysis could be used in descriptive business ethics and give the example of bankers' decisions. Special attention will be paid to storylines and metaphors and to the power and consequences of (business) ethics discourse by giving the example of international anticorruption discourses.

Problems with Applying Classic Moral Theories Within Business Ethics

Business Ethics and Classic Moral Theories

According to Van Luijk and Kimman, well-known business ethicists in the Netherlands, business ethics is an institutionalized discussion about values and norms that should contribute to formulating directions for action [4] or rules [5] for managers [6]. In formulating those directions, classic moral philosophers are often studied. Some scholars within business ethics therefore lean heavily on classic moral theories, such as deontological, utilitarian and virtue "ethical theories."² Peter French: "I am convinced that the primary problem of business ethics is not to identify ways of applying the traditional moral theories and principles in order to evaluate the actions of corporate managers. That, unfortunately, has been the characteristic approach in the field" [7].

Solomon [8] is an example of a scholar using virtue ethics. Scholars who use some sort of integrity approach, such as Kaptein and Wempe [9], usually try to find the right mix between the three classic moral theories. Scholars like Ronald Green [10] take a more deontological approach: They define clear moral guidelines and principles to which companies always have to adhere.³ A theorist like Freeman, with a "fair contracts" approach, reflects the assumptions and methodology of the modern liberal Rawlsian theory of justice and property rights [11]. The stakeholder approach, like the one by Donaldson and Preston, has some affinities with utilitarian notions. Like the utilitarian moral theorists, stakeholder theorists struggle with the following problems: Whom to identify as morally relevant? How to accommodate conflicting interests? And what to do with moral claims that are incomparable? Answers should lead to a situation that is best for all. Contract theorists, such as Donaldson and Dunfee [12], do not so much get their inspiration from the classic moral theories, but make use of other classic philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.

The Human Agent Versus Organizations: The Problem of Intentionality

Classic ethical theories happen to have in common the assigning of a key role to the human agent. The focus is on questions how *individuals* should act in certain, morally relevant situations. After all, the well-being of persons is the primary consideration of Western ethics; most philosophical ethics is about how to treat other human beings. Concepts like “responsibility” and “blame” play central roles.

Theories like utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics can be, according to Van Willigenburg:

...viewed as systematisations of the moral insights, intuitions and beliefs of all who share basic moral concerns and who, therefore, participate in a common search for answers to questions about how to treat each other, how to organize society and how to lead our lives. Ethical theories try to construct a coherent and illuminative set of principles and rules ... But clearly, not one of these theories’ systematisations can provide for the whole truth, though they all start from one or another part of folk morality that we find intuitively plausible and fundamental. Each systematic reconstruction will have its blind spots: areas where its principles do not readily apply or even lead to counterintuitive results. This is certainly the case when different levels of analysis are in play. An ethical theory constructed from the perspective of the individual actor will have difficulty accounting for the corporate context. [13].

The moral rules classical ethical theories prescribe can be used to advise individuals when making decisions. But classic moral theories were not designed for the corporate context. As Van Willigenburg notes, in the corporate context, different levels of analysis are in play. An important issue for business ethicists is thus to decide how far they can go in applying philosophical moral theories – meant for individuals – to organizations. In the famous words of Velasquez, “Although we say that organizations ‘exist’ and ‘act’ like individuals, they obviously are not human individuals. Yet our moral categories are designed to deal with individual humans who feel, reason, and deliberate, and who act on the basis of their own feelings, reasoning and deliberations” [14]. According to Velasquez, a corporation cannot be held morally responsible. It does not have autonomy. Velasquez is a so-called *moral* individualist. To him intentionality is essentially tied to consciousness. And the human kind of intentionality is necessary for moral responsibility. A related problem is how to punish organizations. Organizations cannot be put in jail and their souls cannot be damned. Many business ethicists who believe that organizations cannot be held responsible in a moral sense spend their energy on individuals within organizations, mostly the decision makers: the managers. Interesting and wide juridical and managerial literature exists on “who is to blame.”

Whether or not doing something intentionally is essential to being held responsible is an important question. After all, corporations are capable of doing considerable undeserved harm. And our organizations are complex: division of labor and expertise renders every action employees undertake a minor part of the overall task. This leads to problems in business ethics because of the intentionality condition.

108 “Sin without sinners, crime without criminals, guilt without culprits! Responsibility
109 for the outcome is, so to speak, floating, nowhere finding its natural haven”[15].
110 There are some arguments that organizations can act intentionally whether or not it
111 is seen as a human form of intentionality. These arguments, however, are not very
112 convincing. There are many cases where the agent (the organization) has caused
113 considerable harm (environmental pollution) that it clearly did not intend – as is
114 required for moral responsibility on the intentionality condition. I am convinced
115 that our ordinary (daily) discourse casts a considerable wider net than those
116 business ethicists who defend moral individualism. *I think that in our daily moral*
117 *discourse, the fact that harm is done is more important than the intentionality*
118 *condition and is therefore more appropriate.*

119 The Outcome of Moral Choices

120 I argued that many scholars, who believe strongly in using one of the classic moral
121 theories within business ethics, focus on managers and how they should make
122 individual choices. Those business ethicists focus on advising individuals within
123 companies: managers. Implicitly it is assumed that the conscious decisions of
124 managers determine what actions organizations undertake. Society and human
125 behavior are viewed as the outcomes of conscious (moral) decisions; the function-
126 ing of organizations is seen as the outcome of (conscious) managerial decisions.
127 Thus, if these managers get good moral advice (and abide by it), the organization
128 will behave in a good moral sense. This gives morality a chance to determine
129 behavior. This is why the part of business ethics that leans heavily on classic
130 philosophical ethical theories has clear affinities with choice-based decision
131 theories. Within choice-based theories, the process of weighing alternatives is
132 based on values, i.e., individual preferences over alternative outcomes.⁴

133 In most theoretical ethical discourse, the outcome of moral choices is given.
134 The main problem it tries to address is how to choose between different actions and/
135 or outcomes. But, because of the veer growing complexity of organizations, the
136 distance between actions and outcomes is great in both space and time. Anthony
137 Giddens therefore calls our society a risk culture. What is important here are the
138 consequences these problems have for applying classical moral theories in the field
139 of business ethics. Bauman notes:

140 We can do harm to them (or they may do harm to us) inadvertently, by ignorance rather than
141 design, without anyone in particular wishing ill, acting with malice and be otherwise
142 morally blameworthy ... It also renders impotent the few, but tested and trustworthy
143 ethical rules we have inherited from the past and are taught to obey. After all, they all
144 tell us how to approach people within our sights and reach, and how to decide which actions
145 are good (and thus ought to be taken) and which are bad (and thus ought to be avoided),
146 depending on their visible and predictable effects on such people. Even if we abide by such
147 rules scrupulously, even if everyone around observed them well, we are far from certain
148 that disastrous consequences will be avoided. Our ethical tools—the code of moral behav-
149 ior, the assembly of the rules of thumb we follow—have not been, simply, made to measure
150 to the present powers. [15]

151 Concerns for “Applied Business Ethics”

152 The point I am trying to establish is that context in ethics is important, especially in
153 applied ethics. Sorrel: “I suggest there is a whole genre of applied ethics—‘armchair
154 applied ethics’—that extends in an objectionable way the method of arguing *a priori*
155 and by abstract counter-example that is justifiable in most of the rest of philosophy.
156 In applied ethics, there is an obvious value to leg-work—leaving one’s armchair and
157 finding out about the actual practice of business, medicine and law, including the
158 questions that seem natural to practitioners, or urgent to them at different times” [11].

159 Every issue in daily management has its value implications. Managers, however,
160 are often not aware of this – perhaps one of the reasons why applied business ethics
161 as a field is not as evolved as applied legal or medical ethics. Managers in these
162 fields deal daily with issues they *perceive* as morally relevant; naturally they are
163 more prone to turn to philosophical ethics for help [11]. But when a discourse does
164 not perceive an issue as morally relevant, the theoretical moral discourse runs a risk
165 of being misunderstood and giving intractable advice. Even when business people
166 find certain philosophical discussion interesting, they have a hard time relating it to
167 their daily problems. The ethics are too far removed from daily practice. In other
168 words, the discourses are too different. When talking about the same issue, ethicists
169 and business people sometimes use different terms and concepts and talk “past each
170 other.” This point is also important in relation to stakeholder theory. Social
171 constructivists have shown that various actors are likely to hold different percep-
172 tions of what the problem “really” is [16]. Even if all the relevant representatives of
173 all the relevant stakes are around a table, the question is whether they perceive and
174 are willing to talk about the same problems, let alone the same solutions. “This does
175 not mean that facts don’t enter the discussion. Ironically, participants seem exclu-
176 sively preoccupied with getting the facts straight. They accuse each other of
177 misinterpreting or simply ignoring crucial evidence. Many authors contend that
178 these agreements about facts actually mask a conflict underlying ‘belief systems.’
179 These are sets of causal and normative assumptions about reality” [17]. Both
180 discourses have valid arguments within their own rules, but somehow they differ
181 fundamentally.

182 In an interesting article, Hoffmaster [18] presents some difficulties he has with
183 “applied ethics.” By the latter, he does not mean the catchall term used to refer to
184 activities such as ethics rounds and consultations, ethics committees, etc. The target
185 is “applied ethics” in the sense of a philosophically based and motivated theory.
186 While his article is about applied ethics in the field of medical ethics, some of his
187 points are relevant in the field of business ethics. Let me briefly list his criticism
188 here. What Hoffmaster calls “criticism,” I see as “special areas of concern” when
189 applying philosophical theories to applied business ethics.

190 Hoffmaster makes a distinction between two kinds of criticism that can be
191 leveled against “applied” moral philosophy, namely, internal criticism and external
192 criticism. Internal criticism purports to show that moral theory cannot succeed on
193 its own terms. External criticism points out that moral theory cannot account for the
194 phenomena of morality [18].

A first internal difficulty of applied ethics is that many principles within applied ethics are too general and vague to apply determinately to concrete situations, leading to intractable advice; always a concern for any sort of applied ethics. Within applied business ethics, philosophical ethics can play a role. But the philosophical discourse within a field of applied ethics should also be close to daily (business) practices or it will suffer from what Sorell [11] calls the alienation problem: a breach between ethicists and practitioners. As Stark claims, based on his study of the business ethics literature, “Far too many business ethicists have occupied a rarefied moral high ground, removed from the real concerns of and real-world problems of the vast majority of managers. They have been too preoccupied with absolutist notions of what it means for managers to be ethical, with overly general criticisms . . .” [19].

All the major concepts in moral philosophy are heavily under debate. The proper use is never agreed upon.⁵ Which kind of use of a concept is valid in a particular moral dilemma? In the use of the concept “values,” when we study what is meant by “loss of values,” we see that people can mean completely different things. Although an analysis of concepts can clarify confusion around concepts, it can never establish what a concept “really” means, let alone resolve the disputes in which concepts play a role. “In any moral controversy, the question of whether and if so, how, a principle is to be brought to bear upon that dispute is itself contentious . . . Disparity between the abstract semantic formulations of principles and the particular empirical circumstances they supposedly govern is a consequence of the inherently general nature of language” [18].

A second internal difficulty with applied ethics is that a multiplicity of principles is taken to be relevant to moral problems in the corporate context but when principles conflict, applied ethics does not offer a good way to resolve the conflict. This problem is often mentioned: for any one moral problem, several principles can be applied. Unfortunately, there is no accepted way of choosing one principle over another.⁶

A third internal difficulty of applied ethics is that it is not helpful in addressing some crucial moral issues because these issues challenge assumptions upon which the theoretical edifice of applied ethics is erected. The assumptions of moral theories with long traditions make many managerial ethical issues difficult to address. Addressing them would challenge the assumptions of the existing theories. Noticeable in this regard for business ethics is the debate over who belongs to our moral sphere. What, exactly, is the moral status of a cow? Or, what is the moral status of the environment, when a bank director has to decide upon giving a loan to a potentially dangerous chemical conglomerate? A cow and, certainly, the environment are not autonomous moral agents. Of course, that does not necessarily mean that they are thereby excluded from moral considerations, but the moral status of nonhumans complicates moral discussions to such a degree that the new field of environmental philosophy is as of yet not able to do much more than map the problems this constitutes for our longstanding moral philosophies.

239 Turning to Hoffmaster's external criticism, some theoretical moral theory is, in
240 a number of respects, blind to actual moral phenomena. Therefore, applied ethics
241 runs the danger of not appreciating the dynamic character of morality:

242 Because 'applied ethics' takes morality to be an autonomous theoretical system under
243 which the flotsam of human experience is subsumed, it cannot account for the flux in that
244 experience. It therefore cannot answer three questions that are central to our understanding
245 of morality: why only certain issues come to be recognized as moral problems; how moral
246 problems get categorized or labeled; and how and why moral change occurs. [18]

247 Elaborating on this last issue:

248 What induces and precipitates moral change? The salient moral issues of today are different
249 from those a decade ago, let alone a century ago. 'Applied ethics' nevertheless remains
250 impervious to moral change; it will deal with whatever moral problems are brought before
251 it, assuming that the identification and characterization of moral problems themselves raise
252 no difficulties and that moral problems can be dealt with independently of the contexts in
253 which they arise. Yet, how, when and what issues become 'moral' are vitally important
254 questions. [18]

255 The fact *that* an ethical question arises within a business is as interesting as *what*
256 the question is; that many ethical questions are *not* asked is interesting as well. How
257 animals are treated within Holland's intensive food industry is a good example.
258 The kinds of (moral) arguments used in favor of and against intensive animal
259 husbandry have been around for as long as these practices have existed. Yet, during
260 the crisis of foot and mouth disease, the arguments against intensive animal
261 husbandry gained importance. Why is that? The philosophical moral grounds
262 concerning animals had not changed. Being able to understand why issues are
263 raised about intensive animal husbandry requires more than just studying classical
264 moral theory. To understand these types of questions, the context of moral ques-
265 tions must be examined. There must be an understanding of the *discourse* in which
266 the question appears. The arguments in the Netherlands about intensive animal
267 husbandry can only be understood against the background of the recent outbreaks of
268 bovine diseases like the foot and mouth virus and swine fever.

269 How and why moral questions are asked in certain contexts at certain times is
270 important. "Answering that question requires a broader conception of morality than
271 the identification of morality with philosophical moral theory, a conception that
272 situates morality in social, cultural, and historical milieus" [18]. Discourse theory is
273 well equipped to study precisely that context and show the working of ethics in
274 practice. By making organizational discourse analyses, it pays attention to moral
275 practice; it puts moral problems in context. I will elaborate on this in the next sections.

276 Hoffmaster states, "a theoretically-oriented applied ethics tends to focus on 'big'
277 decisions and portray them in binary terms. By doing so, it ignores pragmatic
278 strategies for responding to moral problems such as abiding time, compromising
279 or cycling through competing values" [18]. When one leans too heavily on
280 theoretical-oriented applied ethics, one's morality runs the risk of being too abstract,
281 of being intractable. On making hard moral decisions, Frohock writes: "Pain and
282 guilt, rather than immorality and irrationality, plague therapy decisions" [20]⁷.

283 Moral decision-making is situational. When studying moral decisions, the context is
 284 of extreme importance. Due to the nature of language, abstract formulations derived
 285 from philosophical theories can easily lead to disparity with the circumstances in
 286 which a person has to make a decision [18].

287 **Language and Meaning**

288 In recent decades, discussions on the nature of truth have profoundly affected social
 289 research. Instead of assuming a given world “out there,” waiting to be discovered,
 290 attention is being drawn to the language processes through which the world is
 291 represented. The access we have to a reality outside language is highly
 292 problematic. Language does not simply report facts; it is not a simple medium for
 293 the transport of meaning. The meaning and effect of words depend on the context in
 294 which they are spoken or written. Du Gay ([21], p. 47): “The meaning that any
 295 object has at any given time is a contingent, historical achievement . . . theorists of
 296 discourse argue that the meaning of objects is different from their mere existences,
 297 and that people never confront objects as mere existences, in a primal manner;
 298 rather these objects are always articulated within particular discursive contexts.”
 299 Perhaps it is the case, as some philosophers claim, that what exists in the world is
 300 a necessity (independent of human beings or language), but things can only be
 301 differentiated through language. The world itself does not give meaning to objects;
 302 this is done through language. Stated simply, although things might exist outside
 303 language, they get their meanings through language.

304 This view of language implies the possibility to describe the business context as
 305 a discursive construction. The meaning of anything always exists in particular
 306 discursive contexts; meaning is always contextual, contingent, and historical.
 307 For business studies, language is not just seen as reflective of what goes on in an
 308 organization. Discourses and organizations are one in the same. “That is, organizing
 309 becomes communicating through the intersection of discourse and text” [22]. Our
 310 so-called organizational actions are embedded in discursive fields and are only
 311 recognizable as practices through discourse. Organizational discursive practices
 312 exist only in the organizational surroundings and practices they are part of.

313 **Discourse**

314 The concept of discourse plays an important role in most post-positivistic research
 315 and has many meanings. Of its many interpretations (see [23]), here I define
 316 discourse as “a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are
 317 produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through
 318 which meaning is given to physical and social realities” ([16], p. 44). For example,
 319 psychiatric discourse brought the idea of an unconscious into existence in the
 320 nineteenth century (cf. [24], p. 3, [25]). Discourses contain groups of statements

that provide a way of talking and thinking about something, thereby giving meaning to social reality. Discourses are not “out there” between reality and language; they are not just a group of signs. They refer to practices that systematically form the objects we speak of. Discourse is not just a “way of seeing” – a worldview – but is embedded in social practices that reproduce the “way of seeing” as “truth.” Discourses are constitutive of reality [26]. What is and is not true cannot be seen outside discourse; it is internal to it. By looking at what people say and write, we can learn how their world is constructed.

The concept of discourse is often used to overcome oppositions like “action and structure” or “individual and structure.” Since discourses, as used here, institutionalize the way of talking about something, they produce knowledge and thereby shape social practices. Social interactions cannot be understood without the discourses that give them meaning. Discourses function as a structure to behavior; they both enable and constrain it. Since discourses in our context institutionalize the way of talking about something, they produce knowledge and thereby shape social practices. Discourses contain the conditions of possibility of what can and cannot be said. The fact that a question arises in any business context is as interesting as the question asked (and the questions not asked). And every question asked gets some form of an answer (including no answer), which has consequences. Discourses help us understand that a certain question is asked, and give us the spectrum of possible solutions to problems arising from it, i.e., what is or is not seen as a viable solution to a specific problem. A problem’s definition inevitably predisposes certain solutions, and vice versa ([17], p. 6; [27–29]). Compare this with the following quote from Schön and Rein ([30], p. 153):

When participants . . . name and frame the . . . situation in different ways, it is often difficult to discover what they are fighting about. Someone cannot simply say, for example, ‘Let us compare different perspectives for dealing with poverty,’ because each framing of the issue of poverty is likely to select and name different features of the problematic situation. We are no longer able to say that we are comparing different perspectives on “the same problem,” because the problem itself has changed.

Over the last two decades, organization studies have given much attention to language and discourse. Putnam and Fairhurst [31] give a good overview of the developments in the area of discourse theory in organization studies. Alvesson and Kärreman [23] discuss the variety of ways in which the concept of discourse is used in organizations studies. For more on discourse analyses, one could mention Dijk [32] and Titscher et al. [33].

The field of business ethics, however, does not pay much attention to (some form of) discourse theory. Among the exceptions are Parker [34] and Shapiro [35]. Also, Cheney and Christensen [36] discuss corporate rhetoric (not internal discourses, but communication that is directed to outsiders of the organization) on corporate social responsibility from a discursive perspective. Descriptive ethical research in the tradition of Jackall [37], Bird and Waters [38], and Kunda [39], looks at what and how moral issues are an issue in the daily life of managers. How do managers talk about ethics and what moral issues do they encounter?

365 Discourse and Values

366 Like meaning, values are immanent features of discourse. When we give meaning
367 to something, we are also valuing it. Even though a Durkheimian view is clearly not
368 endorsed here (our emphasis is on language, not institutions), there is a parallel.
369 To Durkheim social institutions, collective ways of thinking, feeling, and doing are
370 not empty but full of values (values give meaning to relationships). In similar
371 fashion, discursive practices are not empty; they are filled with values. By giving
372 something a name, we highlight certain aspects. But in that same process, all other
373 possible qualities are placed in the background or even ignored. Values, causal
374 assumptions, and problem perceptions affect each other. In our daily lives, we jump
375 so often between normative and factual statements that we do not realize how much
376 our views of facts determine whether we see problems in the first place. But when
377 we study those discussions more carefully, we can see that “is” and “ought” are
378 intertwined. Seemingly technical positions in discourses conceal normative com-
379 mitments. Discourses make more than claims of reality – they accomplish what
380 Schön and Rein [40] have called the “normative leap,” or the connection between
381 a representation of reality and its consequences for action. Within most versions of
382 discourse theory, the strict dichotomy between facts and values ceases to make
383 sense. Facts and values here are not treated as ontologically different; discourse
384 theory treats them as different sides of the same coin. The “is” and “ought” shape
385 each other in countless ways. Language is thus neither neutral nor static in com-
386 municating meaning. The awareness that language does not neutrally describe the
387 world is important to corruption research. Subtle linguistic forms and associated
388 symbolic actions shape our convictions and presuppositions ([41], p. 79).

389 As discussed, discourses contain the conditions of possibility of what can and
390 cannot be said. The fact *that* a moral question arises in business is as interesting
391 as *what* question is asked; as is the fact that many moral questions are *not*
392 asked. Every question that is asked gets some form of an answer which has
393 consequences. Every (non-) decision of any manager in any company is a social
394 activity and affects people’s lives [42]. In a specific discourse, different moral
395 questions are raised than in others. As soon as managers of soccer clubs start to talk
396 about soccer as a “product” (a relatively new development), a new world opens up
397 around the same old game with new opportunities, managerial problems, and new
398 moral issues [43]. Discourses do not only help us understand that a certain moral
399 question is asked, they also give us the spectrum of possible solutions to moral
400 problems being raised, i.e., what is or is not seen as a viable solution to a specific
401 moral problem. It can be suspected that the framing of moral questions by managers
402 [40] differs from moral questions framed by professional ethicists. Where moral
403 philosophers frame moral questions for managers based on their philosophical
404 discourses, managers (needing a “tractable morality,” see [44]) frame their moral
405 questions on a daily basis.

406 Although Aristotelians and pragmatics like Dewey [45] intensely consider
407 deliberation and conversation, there are clear differences with the discourse theory
408 as described above. Aristotelian ethicists are usually looking for virtues to be

named, virtues that are good. Most discourse theorists though, want to stay away from anything associated with essentialism. Instead of looking for virtues for individuals, discourse theorists want to problematize the central role of individuals (at least the central role of individuals in research). Individuals are part of organizations; they operate in discursive contexts that determine (at least in great part) their behavior. Discourses thus focus more on context than on individuals and their virtues. The extent to which individuals are influenced by their contexts gives rise to extensive discussions about their autonomy and freedom. These discussions (interesting as they are) are left here aside. What is important is that the behavior of individuals is, at least to a high degree, influenced by the organizational entities in which they work and that affects the morality of managers. Jackall [37] concludes:

... because moral choices are inextricably tied to personal fates, bureaucracy erodes internal and even external standards of morality not only in matters of individual success and failure but in all the issues that managers face in their daily work. Bureaucracy makes its own internal rules and social context the principal moral gauges for action ... Within such crucibles, managers are continually tested as they continually test others. They turn to each other for moral cues for behavior and come to fashion specific situational moralities for specific significant others in their world."

Discourse Analysis

How can we transition from an ontological and epistemological stance of meaning that is always historically and socially constructed to a theoretical model useful to empirical ethics research? De Graaf [46] has offered an example from postmodern research where empirical corruption research is conducted based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social action [47–50]. By combining macro and micro factors and everything in between, it is an example of how concrete corruption case studies can be conducted. Contextual research in this way can establish dispositions that *can* lead to corruption. Since dispositions do not always manifest, they cannot be called "causes" in the strict sense of the word. What is important in this type of research is the receptiveness of an individual to corruption, and whether the receptiveness is triggered.

An interesting additional method to traditional ones of describing moral decisions of managers is looking at the way managers talk about and view reality: describing their discourses. Instead of looking at the moral agents or the organization as a moral entity, one can study an organization's internal discourse. In that sense, individuals are neither central to nor the proposed objects of study (methodological individualism); the object of study is discourses. By describing discourses of managers, moral aspects come to the fore.

How does research with discourse theory work? A researcher conducts discourse descriptions or analyses, the basis of which are texts (the material manifestations of discourses). All verbal and written language can be considered. A discourse analysis shows which discursive objects and subjects emerge in social practices, and which conceptualizations are used. Consequently, what is left out in social practices also emerges. It is not the purpose of discourse analysis to retrieve what authors

meant or felt. Discourse analysis is not a search for meaning in texts, empirical or otherwise. The analysis focuses on the *effects* of the texts on other texts. Hajer ([16], p. 54): “discourse analysis investigates the boundaries between . . . the moral and the efficient, or how a particular framing of the discussion makes certain elements appear fixed or appropriate while other elements appear problematic.”

A discourse analysis inquires into forms of problematization and offers a narrative about the production of problems. Why is something considered a problem (or not)? It does not concentrate on answering the problem at hand. In other words, when doing a discourse analysis, one can establish the limits of what can and cannot be said in a particular context, what Foucault [25] called “the conditions of possibility” of a discourse. A discourse analysis can identify the rules and resources that set the boundaries of what can be said, thought and done in a particular (organizational) context or situation. Mauws ([51], p. 235): “Thus, if we are to comprehend how decisions are made . . . it is by examining the conditions of possibility in relation to which these statements are formulated, that is, the often implicit institutionalized speech practices that guide what is and what is not likely to be said (Bourdieu).” By conducting discourse analyses in the field of business ethics, the contextuality of ethics is taken seriously. It gives content to the vague notion of “putting moral problems into context” [18].

An Example: Bankers’ Decisions

In 2001, in Holland the three largest banks dealing with private businesses were ING, ABN-Amro, and Rabobank. Each of the three banks would argue that they differ from each other. Rabobank, for example, is a cooperative company, not listed on any stock exchange. Therefore it does not have to satisfy shareholders and according to Rabobank this means more than just a different legal way of doing business. Rabobank claims that (partly) because they do not have to make a profit to satisfy shareholders, they treat their clients differently. And they claim to care more about the local economy than their competitors do.

One of the many ways in which the three banks could differ are the decisions they make toward requests for a loan by starting businesses. The problem with a starting business for banks is that they pose a higher risk. Many new companies go bankrupt in the first year of their existence.

By understanding how bankers make their choices with respect to starters, a discourse description can render visible the discursive formation within which bankers speak. It can identify the rules about the limits of what can be said and what cannot within a banker’s discourse. A discourse analysis can first of all try to make clear how the banker sees himself, what his identity is. Then it can try to show how the identity of the banker is matched to a situation in which a loan for a starter is decided. It has good opportunities to find rules that managers apply that are not financial norms, and that the bankers themselves are not consciously aware of. Maybe, the manager sees himself and his business, as something essential to the economic development in his region, which could lead to favorable impressions

of starting businesses. Or maybe he is young and trying to make a fast career within his national bank organization, and is very concerned with avoiding big financial risks for his local bank, because the national bank is judging him very heavily on avoiding “mistakes.” This example would lead to very stringent decision rules for starting businesses. A discourse analysis could also compare banks in that way. What are the similarities and what are the differences between the identities of local bank directors. Rabobank claims that it pays much attention to the region a specific bank office is located in. Is that reflected in the way the local bank directors talk about starters and the decision processes whether to give them a loan?

A discourse analysis by De Graaf [26], a study on bankers’ conceptualizations of their customers concluded that there are five different discourses about customers among Dutch bankers (using Q methodology, see also [52, 53]). These discourses contain many aspects about the job of a banker and conceptualizations of their customers. The discourse descriptions give valuable information about the context of managerial decisions. It is shown how bankers in the discourse of a Rabobank make more favorable decisions toward giving loans to starting businesses: They use a discourse where helping to start a business is seen as a moral question; others do not. The latter will ask themselves moral questions about start-up company loans but look primarily at the financial risk, and ask themselves primarily financial questions.

As stated before, in discourses factual and valuational statements are intertwined. Different ways of looking at the factual world lead to different valuations of it and vice versa. The moral problems managers have are always embedded in a context. Morals are always situational. In talking about values, bank managers from a discourse wherein the relationship with the customer is a commercial one, immediately start to talk about fraud and how to prevent it [26]. Moral issues seen by bankers – the treatment of start-ups, environmental issues, using the bank to improve the region, dealing with sponsor money, having a customer in financial difficulty, whether to treat clients differently, when to be completely honest to customers, how to negotiate with customers, etc. – are indissolubly tied to factual images a banker has of his customers. The moral questions and the factual images are part of the same discourse. By giving the best discourse description possible, the differences in moral stances between discourses become apparent by contrasting them.

Storylines and Metaphors

One way to study how discursive practices are shaped is to look at storylines and metaphors. Our own particular worldviews and discourses position us within discussions in terms of the concepts, metaphors, and stories of that discourse. For business ethics researchers, it is important that a discourse analysis can show how forces in language influence moral positions by looking at the role metaphors and storylines play within a discourse. Discourse analysis can also gain perspectives into the structure, dynamics, and directions of conflicting discourses, like narrative strategies.

Stories play an important role in people's lives; in large part, they give meaning to them [54]. If you want to get to know someone, you ask for a life story. Stories tell about what is important and what is not. Philosophers like Johnson [55] or McIntyre [56] would go so far as to argue that stories are central to creating human understanding: "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' If I can answer the prior question, 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" ([57], p. 304). Fisher ([58], p. xiii) claims that "all forms of human communication need to be seen fundamentally as stories." Many scholars agree that stories are filled with information and are efficient at conveying it ([59], p. 9). Boje ([60], p. 106) argues: "People engage in a dynamic process of incremental refinement of their stories of new events as well as ongoing reinterpretations of culturally sacred story lines"; ([61], p. 1001): "In sum people do not just tell stories, they tell stories to enact an account of themselves and their community." The assumption that meaning is produced in linguistic form fits well with exploring stories, which are simply one type of linguistic form, or elements of a discourse with certain characteristics.

Within stories, "is" and "ought" are closely connected. Even if they seem to give simple factual descriptions, an enormous implicit normative power lies within narratives. Hayden White ([62], p. 26): "What else could narrative closure exist of than the passage of one moral order to another? ... Where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too." According to White, the events that are recorded in the narrative appear "real" precisely insofar as they belong to an order of moral existence, just as they derive their meaning from their placement in this order. It is because the events described are or are not conducive to the establishment of social order that they find a place in the narrative attesting to their reality ([63], p. 10). A narrative analysis can therefore shed light on how different moral positions relate to each other. It shows how narrative structures (partly) determine moral positions and identities, and how they thereby influence the actions of individuals and organizations. And they show how internal dynamics of a discourse can influence the moral position taken; this can also be used strategically. An example from a study by Bracking ([64], p. 44): "These attempts by members of the political elite to gain political ground relative to one another by attempting to fix the others' behavior as 'corrupt,' entail 'corruption' acting as a signifier of moral detraction in a political discourse that pretends liberal reform but serves authoritarian power. Narratives like these often involve 'illegal' foreign exchange transactions ... There is also a popular narrative of corruption acting as a moral censure of a rapacious elite."

Scholars have pointed to the moral significance of metaphors in business studies and in many empirical organizational discourse analyses, the role of metaphors has been brought to the fore [65–67]. Weick [68], for example, pointed to the operational consequences of metaphor. Just like stories, metaphors are important to business ethicists because of the (often implicit) moral baggage they carry. Describing metaphors in discursive practices can bring clarity to how metaphors, in part, morally shape discursive practices, i.e., how morality is embedded in discursive practices.

582 **The Power and Consequences of (Business) Ethics Discourse – The** 583 **Example of International Anticorruption Discourses**

584 When values are an integral part of any discourse, they are an integral part of the
 585 business ethics discourse. The thesis that meaning is constructed by and through
 586 discourse has implications for the notion of business ethics itself. It is, as Hackley
 587 and Kitchen ([42], p. 38) note, “inseparable from ways of talking about and doing
 588 ethics and ethical things.” The descriptive ethics of the researcher comprises
 589 a moral component; descriptive ethics contains values itself and does not just mirror
 590 reality [cf. [69]]. Business ethicists’ studies play a role in what Foucault called “the
 591 regime of truth.”

592 It was often concluded in business studies literature that “independence” and
 593 “accountability” of employees were good for a company in a business sense. At the
 594 same time, business ethicists concluded they were good in a moral sense. Within
 595 companies, it is important who speaks of morals, what their viewpoints are and
 596 whose interests are represented. In a nutshell, how is ethics turned into a discourse?
 597 How do the forms of problematization of managers fit with forms of problema-
 598 tization of business ethics? The Foucauldian question becomes, to what extent is
 599 business ethics used as a power tool to discipline workers? This is what Bauman
 600 argues too. He accuses organizations (bureaucracies) in our society of “instrumen-
 601 talizing” ethics to achieve the goals of the organization rather than ethics being the
 602 systematic reflection of the goals of the organization. When opinion within
 603 a management discourse is that employees steal too much from the company,
 604 they can hire “integrity consultants.” These consultants do not evaluate the goals
 605 or the products of the organization, nor do they look at whether employees are
 606 treated kindly. Instead, they are used to discipline employees with the use of an
 607 ethical discourse.

608 There is considerable power in structured ways of viewing reality. Power in
 609 post-positivistic research is defined relationally rather than an institutional or
 610 personal feature. So-called genealogical discourse analyses of business cases and
 611 controversies analyze how power and knowledge function, how the rules
 612 and resources that set the limits of what can be said are working. By using
 613 a grammar in its descriptions that replaces the subject with consciousness by
 614 a subject as the receiver of social meaning, static concepts are in genealogy made
 615 fluid in a historical process. Within genealogy, Foucault (e.g., [25]) looked for the
 616 way forms of problematizations are shaped by other practices. Shapiro ([35], p. 29):

617 Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. Committed to inquiry, it seeks
 618 endlessly to dissolve the coherence of systems of intelligibility that give individual and
 619 collective identities to persons/peoples and to the orders that house them by recreating the
 620 process of descent within which subjectivities and objectivities are produced.

621 Foucault [25, 70] has shown how power works through “subjectification.”
 622 A practical example: Bracking ([64], p. 36) argues that “the formal definition of
 623 corruption used by international financial institutions ... acts in practice as
 624 a strategic resource and signifier within World Bank political discourse, indicating

bad governance, illegitimacy and geopolitical position . . . Rather it is the wider strategic role that the concept plays as a disciplinary governance concept which is critical to donors' attempted management of African politics and societies."

Every discourse claims to talk about reality. In doing so, it classifies what is (not) true permitted, desirable, and so on. Truth and power are closely related. As Foucault ([70], p. 74) stated, "Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which induces and which extend it; a 'regime of truth.'" Power is not just repressive; it is always productive. A genealogical discourse analysis within business ethics can reveal some of the ways power functions in discourse and organization, how the rules and resources that delineate the limits of what can be said are working. It can follow back in history the traces of a discourse and reveal the contingencies of a current discourse.

As an example of genealogical studies, let's examine the evidence of power influences of international corruption discourses. Building partly on the work of Foucault, some have shown how discourses on corruption with their inherent worldviews give some an advantage over others. For example, Roberts et al. [71] have shown how the discourse on governance in the so-called Pacific Plan resulted in a technocratic direction such that a particularly narrow conceptualization of governance dominates. "In a direct reading of the Pacific Plan and the interventions it empowers there is ample evidence that governance (good and bad) is used in a disciplining way" [71]. As a result, most emphasis in the region was laid on institution building (offices of auditing, statisticians, and so on). "The definitions and modes of monitoring governance provide a framework through . . . which Pacific Island elites . . . are able to know and analyze their region As the Pacific comes under the gaze of an expert calculus that frames forms of governing as 'good' or 'bad' the island nations and people are once again defined in terms of lack, with answers proffered by development experts" [71].

To reveal the forces or power of a discourse, genealogy has to go back to the moment in which an interpretation or identity became dominant within a discourse, like the Pacific Plan, in which case many alternatives for the dominant governance discourses are available. In fact, in some cases the alternatives effectively challenge the governance interpretations of the Plan. "The continual remake of governance occurs in several ways as social movements act to make strategic use of the term within the context of the Pacific Plan and beyond it" [71].

In so-called critical corruption studies, questions are asked about the consequences of the international anticorruption measures. Brown and Cloke ([72], p. 281): "Recently, together with several other commentators [73–78] we have been promoting the need for critical academic reflection upon the growing calls for an international 'anticorruption' crusade." Why, then, has there been such an explosion of interest in corruption since the 1990s, and why is there such an apparent political commitment toward tackling the problem [79] when there is no evidence that corrupt behavior has increased? Brown and Cloke [79] argue that an important factor has been shifting geopolitical priorities after the end of the Cold War.

The effects of anticorruption measures turn out to be manifold, and toward much more than simply reducing the levels of corruption. “Despite the evolution of structural adjustment into a kindlier, cuddlier poverty reduction version, within the international financial institutions there is no serious commitment to address the issues of regulation and control so vital to any understanding or control of corruption that debilitates countries of the North, East, West, and South” ([80], p. 318). Once again, the importance of context is emphasized. Consequences of anything will always depend on the particular situation, so it is stressed. Brown and Cloke ([72], p. 282/283):

This lack of detailed, contextualized analysis of the implementation of supposed anti-corruption initiatives is, we would argue, reflected everywhere, rather than having anything to do with any uniqueness of Nicaraguan circumstances. . . . we have also come across a series of major reservations expressed particularly by those whose evaluation of such activities stems from long-term research experience in the country concerned . . . Taken together, these points reflect our concerns that in too many cases what is referred to as corruption has been taken out of the context within which it occurs both globally (in terms of the interactions between North and South, the transforming influence of globalization etc.) and locally (reflecting a tendency to seek for global explanations for and solutions to a monolithic signifier named corruption, rather than more detailed considerations of the complex dynamics of the nature of multiple, interlinked corruptions within individual societies).

Most of the critical corruption studies are not against anticorruption measures per se, but what is labeled “corrupt,” what is not, and the effects thereof are critical. A special concern is what the negative consequences will be for the poor (e.g., [72]).

The *intentions* of anticorruption discourses are questioned as well. Some claim, for example, that such discourses reflect a post-Washington consensus seeking to reinvigorate regulatory institutions while maintaining blame for the failure of development in South American governments [81]. Another example: “Policy on corruption is deeply embedded within the wider constructions of global neo-liberal and free market economic governance [79, 82–84], where a clear divide between the political and economic and between the public and private spheres is expected” [64] – remarks similar to Roberts et al. in their study on the Pacific Plan. Kondos focuses on the meaning of favoritism using a set of Nepalese cultural practices, showing that “the favor” and therefore “partiality” as values are in accordance with Hindu cultural values. Yet he also explains how Western intellectuals tend to construct “favoritism” to mean corruption and its motives. As a result an ideological conflict in the field of political ethics arises from Western pressure to adopt the principle of “impartiality” in government [85]. Gupta [86] focuses on discourses of corruption in contemporary India, specifically, practices within the lower echelons of Indian bureaucracy and representations of the state in the mass media. He stresses vigilance toward the imperialism of the Western conceptual apparatus, questioning the Eurocentric distinction between state and civil society and the conceptualization of the state as a unitary entity. Some also see the use of (insincere) anticorruption discourse as a strategic tool to legitimize the invasion of Iraq ([81, 87]).

In some critical corruption studies we find criticism of ideologies, especially neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is not just blamed for promoting the interests of the

elite via anticorruption discourses; some even blame it for *causing* corruption. Whyte [87], for example, states: “Neo-liberalism creates a fertile environment for ‘corrupt’ market transactions to flourish, because it seeks the creation of limited space as a means of promoting entrepreneurialism and the pursuit of self-interests,” once again reminding us of Roberts et al. and the Pacific Plan. Paradoxically, the Enron scandal, which involved falsification of balance sheets, manipulation of accounting practices, and the creation of an image of financial health, showed the pervasive nature of corruption within corporate America – a hotbed of neoliberal thought. [88] states, “corruption is more than a simple, isolated crime committed for personal gain. It is a part of corporate and political, culture – more pervasive and acceptable among elites than we realize. In short, it is *becoming institutionalized*.”

Others are very critical of almost all anticorruption measures – integrity workshops, national integrity system analysis, anticorruption commissions – in the sense that they are seen as parts of wider mendacious practices where people are subjected as supernumeraries to human development: “The anticorruption discourse and donor practice itself can cause perverse effects which aggravate cycles of deteriorating governance (discussed by various authors in Bracking, 2007)” ([64], p. 37). Just as we saw in the Pacific Plan example [71], it is often stated in critical corruption literature that the current dominating anticorruption discourse is too focused on technical solutions and the public-private distinction, resulting in too much attention to the public sector as the major cause of corruption. In short, the “anticorruption crusade needs to be shorn of its antistate bias” ([79], p. 291).

Conclusion

When managerial decisions are examined, somehow the business context must be included in the analysis. First in this chapter, I discussed problems with choice-based theories on managerial decisions. Also, methodological individualism turned out to be problematic. In this chapter, causalities that transcend individuals were the proposed unit of analysis in empirical moral research, namely, discourse. After discussing discourse theory, the conclusion is that (the different forms of) discourse theory can help studying managerial decisions in many ways. I showed what a discourse analysis within business ethics could look like. Special attention was paid to stories and metaphors. There is considerable power in structured ways of viewing reality, with power defined relationally rather than an institutional or personal feature. Most of the critical corruption studies are not against anticorruption measures per se, but what is labeled “corrupt,” what is not, and the effects thereof are critical. A special concern is what the negative consequences will be for the poor.

Notes

1. This chapter is largely based on [1–3].
2. I do not mean those scholars who defend the amoral model, like Von Hajek or Friedman, who believe doing business has nothing to do with ethics.

- 756 3. One could also consider Badarocco, trying to formulate norms on the basis of defining
757 moments.
- 758 4. Facts and values are often clearly separated. Values come into play after the process of
759 information gathering. Prescriptive ethics traditionally focus on this moment. The prevailing
760 notion is that ethics and the non-ethical language that describes and explains situations and
761 events belong to separate domains.
- 762 5. See Schermer (2001) for a very interesting study on the concept of autonomy in ethical theory
763 and hospital practice.
- 764 6. When managers' decisions depend on the conviction that they should treat a person not solely
765 as a means to an end (deontology), or the notion of promoting the greatest good for the greatest
766 number (utilitarianism), what should they do?
- 767 7. This raises doubts as to the rationality of moral decisions. When we study moral decisions, we
768 can see that they do not conform to some philosophical ethical theory.

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